Pear trees along the main thoroughfare, Donkin Street:

Left across: Blossoming pear trees photographed in 1921.

This picture: By 1956 the trees were still there, although the ones at right had been trimmed.

Beaufort West and its legacy of trees

ANNALIZE MOUTON

Left: Most of the old pear trees in Donkin Street have succumbed to age. This is one of the few remaining along the busy road.

Below: This old Karee in Bird Street is reputedly the oldest tree in Beaufort West.

MARÉ MOUTON

Beaufort West in the middle of the arid Great Karoo would not be the first town that comes to mind when one thinks of streets lined with heavy blossoming trees. Yet, over the last almost two centuries hundreds of trees and especially pear trees have been planted along its streets and right from its inception in 1837, the Beaufort West Municipality encouraged people to plant trees and even passed bylaws that made the planting of trees compulsory.

Regulation 39, which in later years was the cause of many a problem, stipulated that every owner or resident of a house or business had to plant trees in front of their property. And not any tree. The Commissary's permission had to be obtained as to the choice of the tree to be planted. For non-compliance to the regulation or for the neglect of young trees, residents were fined 1 shilling. Damage to established trees could put the person back a couple

Ever since Beaufort West was laid out in 1818, trees have had a special place in this town on the N1 in the Karoo. They have been protected by municipal regulations, and are still cared for today, writes Annalize Mouton.

of pounds, like the woman who chopped down a large mulberry tree in the main road and was fined £5.

In *Hooyvlakte, The Story of Beaufort West*, W G H and S Vivier paint a vivid picture from data found in the town's archival resources. The first streets in the town were lined with weeping willows, mulberries, pear and Melia (Persian lilac) trees. Trees were obviously planted for shade and the beautification of the town, but it surely also must have helped to curb the dust which at times would have been a real nuisance, with wagons and horse-

carts passing through the town daily. These trees also served as posts to tether riding and cart horses to and to hang scales from. Almost every household in the town had their own fruit trees in their gardens: fig, peach, first class oranges which were delivered to the market in Cape Town, pear, apricot, apple, mulberries and others. From mulberry wood beautiful furniture were also made.

When in 1886 the acacias were infested with an Australian louse, *Icerya purchasi*, and residents feared that it could kill their citrus trees, the municipality gave permission for infested trees to be removed and replaced with pear, almond and karee, *Rhus lancea*.

Through the years the townspeople were constantly reminded of Regulation 39 and petitioned to plant trees. Those who did not comply were fined. In 1895 the Town Council applied to the Secretary of Agriculture for control over all the trees in the streets of Beaufort West.
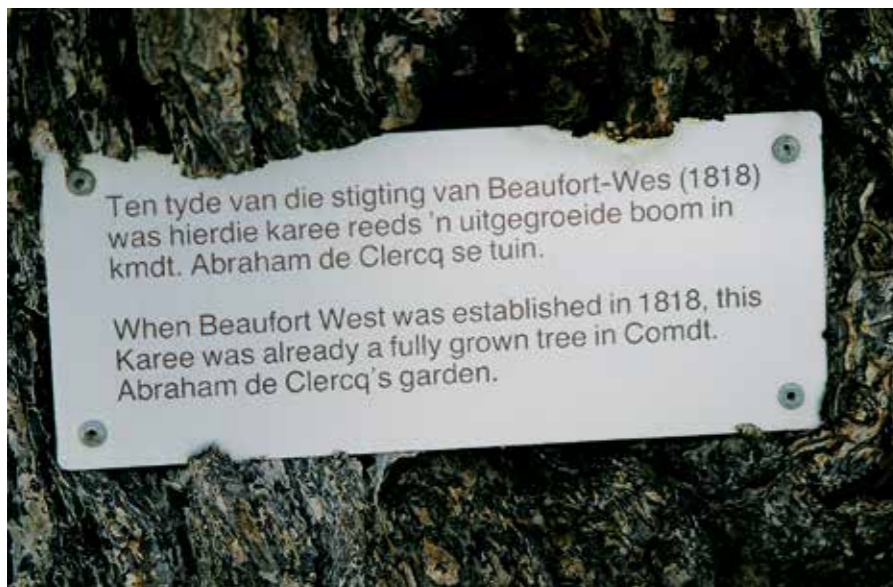
MARÉ MOUTON

The old trees of Beaufort West

If a tree needed to be taken out, for whatever reason, the municipality's permission had to be obtained and another had to be planted in its stead, preferably the sweet saffron pear tree, a hybrid variety peculiar to Beaufort West. Thus it came that in the springs of the early 1900s the streets in Beaufort West were lined with hundreds of white blossomed pear trees. Looking at old photographs one can only marvel at what it must have looked like. Residents had the right to the fruits of the trees immediately in front of their own houses and a regulation passed in 1881 made it illegal to pick fruit from trees in front of other people's houses. There were also many almond trees and white-flower acacias, but her pear trees were the pride of the town. In 1965 it was recorded that there were 255 pear trees in Donkin Street, 156 in Bird Street and 112 in Blyth Street, not to mention those in the gardens and behind the houses.

Sadly, to make room for overhead electricity and telephone cables, many trees had to be trimmed and some were severely damaged and ruined. Later when cables went underground, trenches had to be dug and again it was the trees that suffered most, this time by the disturbance to their roots. To aggravate matters, pavements and tarred roads induced a man-made drought hindering whatever surface water the trees were getting. In 1965 the oldest pear tree in the town, planted in 1850, had a circumference of 295 cm. In the winter of that same year the municipality planted another 200 sweet saffron pear trees, all cultivated in the municipal nursery from cuttings taken from established trees in the town.

The town also boasts some very old cypresses and karees to which the plaques on the trees telling their stories and age, testify. And in 1950 the then principal of the High School, Mr J P Theart, planted the first olive trees. Since then many olive trees have been planted in the town itself, especially along the streets in Hospitaalheuwel, and on farms in the district.

Beaufort West residents are still encouraged to plant trees in front of their houses and in their gardens. The municipality will provide trees to residents and schools free of charge on condition that they take proper care of these trees. And if a tree along the street needs to be taken out, one still needs permission from the municipality. It then has to be replaced by another, preferably an indigenous one, especially karee and wild olive – this is what the municipality is doing with all invasive alien trees under 3 metres tall. ∎

A massive thorn tree in the residential area dwarfs everything below it.

MARÉ MOUTON (3)

MARÉ MOUTON

The oldest trees in Beaufort West bear plaques with their history, such as this massive old Karee (top) in Bird Street.

Ten tyde van die stigting van Beaufort-Wes (1818) was hierdie karee reeds 'n uitgegroeide boom in kmdt. Abraham de Clercq se tuin.

When Beaufort West was established in 1818, this Karee was already a fully grown tree in Comdt. Abraham de Clercq's garden.

Left and above: Bird Street, which runs parallel to the main street, still has pear trees along one side, often shading historic houses.